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ABSTRACT

This brochure, a presentation of observations made by stepparents about their experiences, is designed to help new and future stepfamilies look realistically at problems which may confront them. Steps to take before remarriage which may ease the transition into the new family are suggested: (1) examining motives for marrying; (2) accommodating differences; (3) getting acquainted with the children; and (4) examining finances. Problems which many stepfamilies have encountered are presented with suggested ways families deal with them. Special problems of children in a stepfamily situation are discussed, e.g., coping with changes, over-attachment to the single parent, child with a deceased parent, and the child of divorce. Some challenges faced by parents include comparisons of the stepparent to the absent parent, questions of authority, supports for the stepparent, manipulative behaviors, stepsiblings, and communication problems. A final section identifies resource agencies and a reading list. (NRB)

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YOURS, MINE & OURS:

tips for
stepparents

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written by
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Introduction

The number of divorces in the United States is increasing every year. In 1976, it passed the 1-million mark. Of those who divorce, four out of five remarry, thus adding to the steadily growing stepfamily phenomenon. Although there are no hard statistics on the number of stepfamilies in the United States, experts estimate that 6.6 million children under the age of 18 live in a household with a stepparent. This figure fails to take into account the untold numbers of children who live part time with a stepparent. The total number of stepchildren may be closer to 15 million.

Because of the increasing number of stepfamilies, the adjustments to "living in step" affect a large segment of the population. More and more people need information about stepparenting. Since little scientific study has been devoted to the subject, there are few research findings on which to base a definitive report or a "how to" manual. This publication attempts to bridge the information gap by presenting some observations made by stepparents about their experiences. It does not say all there is to say on the subject, nor does it include the advantages to be found in the stepfamily situation. It is designed to help new and future stepfamilies look more realistically at some of the problems which may confront them.

The conflicts and tensions which all families experience at times are complicated in a steprelationship. There are problems unique to the stepfamily. Many stepfamilies tend to be influenced, albeit unconsciously, by myths. The absent parent, living or dead, can be a source of tension. Emotional arguments arise relative to "his," "her," and "their" children; the family budget and ex-spouses; and differences in previous family lifestyles.

Our culture has no traditions to provide remarried parents with a blueprint of expected problems and how to deal with them. In fact, the stereotypes of stepfamily life are unrealistic and extreme, as all too often stepparents are portrayed as either wicked and cruel or perfectly adjusted.

For centuries, stepmothers have been maligned in fairy tales and literature as cruel and wicked. Hansel and Gretel's stepmother twice abandoned them in the forest, and jealousy drove Snow White's stepmother to try to poison her. Perhaps the world's most infamous stepmother was Cinderella's, who forced her into drudgery and servitude. These concepts evolved at a time when life expectancy was short, and deaths caused by complications of childbirth were common. Fathers, more often than not, remarried to provide care for their children. Therefore, in the past, most stepparents were stepmothers. Today, there are probably more stepfathers

than stepmothers because courts tend to award custody of children to mothers, a trend that may be changing slowly.

Although there are a few cruel and abusive stepfathers in literature, no myths have grown up around them, probably because men usually spend less time with children, thus decreasing opportunities for conflict. Also, women are expected to show affection toward children, but such behavior has not traditionally been required of men. A father, traditionally the ultimate enforcer of discipline, may leave the actual dispensing of it to his wife, thereby casting her in the role of villain.

In contrast to past myths, today's media tends to project a "wonderland" image of the stepfamily—instant love and good humor solve all problems. But this modern-day myth sets an impossible and unrealistic goal. Any stepfamily that models itself after a TV or movie stepfamily will probably find itself deficient by comparison.

This brochure is designed to provide a myth-free, down-to-earth perspective on step-parenting. It has two purposes: first, to suggest some steps to take before remarriage to ease the transition into the new family; second, to alert couples to problems that many step-families have encountered and to indicate ways they have found to deal with them. This brochure is not meant to deter "stepparent-hood," but rather to assist those who are considering it.

Tips on Preparing to Live in Step

In a stepfamily, at least three and usually more individuals find themselves struggling to form new familial relationships while still coping with reminders of the past. Each family member brings to the situation expectations and attitudes which are as diverse as the personalities involved. The task of creating a successful stepfamily, as with any family, will be easier for all concerned if each member tries to understand the feelings and motivations of the others as well as his or her own.

It is important to discuss the realities of living in step prior to the marriage, when problems that are likely to arise can be foreseen and examined theoretically. If you are contemplating entering a steprelationship, here are some points to consider:

- Plan ahead! Some chapters of Parents Without Partners conduct "Education for Remarriage" workshops. Contact your local chapter or write to: Parents Without Partners, 7910 Woodmont Avenue, Washington, D.C. 20014.
- Examine your motives and those of your future spouse for marrying. Get to know him or her as well as possible under all sorts of circumstances. Consider the possible impact of contrasting lifestyles.
- Discuss the modifications that will be required in bringing two families together. Compare similarities and differences in your concepts of childrearing.
- Explore with your children the changes remarriage will bring, i.e., new living arrangements, new family relationships, effect on their relationship with their noncustodial parent.
- Give your children ample opportunity to get to know your future spouse well. Consider your children's feelings, but don't allow them to make your decision about remarriage.
- Discuss the disposition of family finances with your future spouse. An open and honest review of financial assets and

responsibilities may reduce unrealistic expectations and resultant misunderstandings.

- Understand that there are bound to be periods of doubt, frustration, and resentment.

Tips on Living in Step

Under ordinary circumstances any marriage is complex and challenging; but the problems of a subsequent marriage are more complicated, since more people, relationships, feelings, attitudes, and beliefs are involved than in a first marriage. The two families may have differing roles, values, standards, and goals. Because its members have not shared past experiences, the new family may have to redefine rights and responsibilities to fit individual and combined needs.

Time and understanding are key allies in negotiating the transition from single parent to stepfamily status. Consideration of the following points may ease the transition process:

- Let your relationship with stepchildren develop gradually. Don't expect too much too soon—from the children or from yourself. Children need time to adjust, accept, and belong. So do parents.
- Don't try to replace a lost parent; be an additional parent. Children need time to mourn the parent lost through divorce or through death.
- Expect to deal with confusing feelings—your own, your spouse's, and the children's. Anxiety about new roles and relationships may heighten competition among family members for love and attention; loyalties may be questioned. Your children may need to understand that their relationship with you is valued but different from that of your relationship with your spouse and that one cannot replace the other. You love and need them both, but in different ways.

- Recognize that you may be compared with the absent parent. Be prepared to be tested, manipulated, and challenged in your new role. Decide, with your mate, what is best for your children and stand by it.
- Understand that stepparents need support from natural parents on childrearing issues. Rearing children is tough; rearing someone else's is tougher.
- Acknowledge periods of cooperation among stepsiblings. Try to treat stepchildren and your own with equal fairness.
- Communicate! Don't pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. Acknowledge problems immediately and deal with them openly.
- Admit that you need help if you need it. Don't let the situation get out of hand. Everyone needs help sometime. Join an organization for stepfamilies; seek counseling.



Examine your motives and those of your future spouse for marrying. Understanding motives may help to avoid unrealistic expectations and resultant disappointments.

Examining Motives

Most people entering a remarriage expect that there will be some difficulties associated with creating a stepfamily, but they either hope the problems will disappear or will not be too serious. Strong needs for love, companionship, and financial or childrearing assistance may outweigh reservations about entering a steprelationship. A parent who is considering remarriage should ask, "Have I found someone with whom I truly want to share my life, or am I remarrying primarily for the sake of the children?"

"I think you have to consider both your own needs and the children's," says Mary, a remarried mother of two. "One can't overshadow the other. Your children won't be with you forever; but on the other hand, if the kids aren't happy, the marriage won't be either."

"My children took to Lois as soon as they met her," says Jim, a widower with two small children, "but that's not why I married her."

"I'm sure I had Gary [her son] in the back of my mind when I decided to remarry," adds Lois. "One thing that attracted me to Jim was that he was a parent already and knew what to expect of a child, but I would never have remarried just to give Gary a father. In fact," she continues, "if Gary had been 15 instead of 9, I don't think I would have remarried at all, because he might have been too set in his ways and there would have been a lot of problems."

For some single parents, the job of rearing a child alone can seem overwhelming, and marriage is seen as an ideal solution. However, "If you just want a housekeeper and baby sitter," advises Jane, a stepmother, "hire one. Or if it is strictly a marriage of convenience, both parties should recognize this from the start."

The parent also should ask, "Is this person really willing to share my responsibilities as a parent?" If he or she is impatient with children, doesn't want to get involved with their activities, and resents sharing the parent with the children, these attitudes should be known from the beginning. Richard, a stepfather, says, "I think it's a mistake to marry someone with children if you don't like kids. It's a package deal—the mother and the children come together."

The opposite is also true. "If you're mainly interested in becoming an instant parent to make up for lost time," adds Richard, a 40-year-old bachelor who married a mother of three, "the marriage itself may not be so good."



Get to know your future spouse as well as possible under all sorts of circumstances. Consider the possible impact of contrasting lifestyles. Discuss the modifications that will be required in bringing two families together.

Accommodating Differences

In any marriage, a husband and wife must learn to coordinate their daily routines and adjust to each other's habits. But in a second marriage, these adjustments may be more difficult because each partner has already established patterns of interaction as husband or wife and has certain expectations of a spouse. Since these expectations may differ, they should be explored as much as possible before marriage.

In fact, all types of differences should be brought into the open before marriage. Differing interests, likes, dislikes, and personal traits should be acknowledged and shared. These differences need consideration in terms of their impact on their relationship and on family life. Differences in viewpoint or interests can be the cause of frequent conflict or, with acceptance and appreciation, prove beneficial and enriching. Not discussing differences for fear of preventing the marriage may be damaging in the long run. Knowing something about each other's expectations, habits, interests, and personal traits may keep minor irritations from growing into major issues.

Acknowledging differences before marriage is important to all couples, but it is even more essential when children are involved, for parents must consider their children's habits and interests too. Joyce McDonald, a psychiatric social worker, says, "You know it's hard, when a couple gets married, just to relate to one another; and then when they have a child in a natural family, it gets more complicated; but when you bring two families together, it makes it that much harder."

"Once children come on the scene," says Ray, a newly married stepfather, "your whole life becomes scheduled around them. Your life is no longer your own. If you realize that and are willing to accept it, you are well on the path to success."

Two parents can have very different ideas about such matters as children's diet, bedtime, household duties, hygiene, independence, and freedom of choice. The meshing of two sets of children can be especially difficult. Children have developed values assimilated in their former families and may resist changes introduced by a newcomer.

Jenny had always prepared regular, well-balanced meals for her children, while her new stepchildren were used to eating whenever and whatever they liked. "At first, they didn't like sitting down and eating with the whole family," she says. "They didn't like vegetables. On the other hand, they were much more used to clearing the table and cleaning up the kitchen than mine were."

"When I was growing up I had chores to do every Saturday morning before I could go out to play," says Jim. "My stepson had never even made his own bed."

"I believe in teaching children to be independent at an early age," says Dorothy, a stepmother of two teenage girls. "My husband Steve says he believes this too, but I still think he pampers them. He's always doing things for them that they could do for themselves."

Living together involves a give and take of old and new ways until an acceptable compromise is reached.



Never place your children in the position of making a decision about your remarriage.

Getting Acquainted With the Children

Children need ample opportunities to get to know their future stepparent. They need candid answers to questions about how remarriage might affect their lives. They can be encouraged to express freely their feelings about the impending marriage. *BUT*, as Gerda L. Schulman of the Jewish Family Service in New York wrote in 1972, "The difference . . . between allowing a child whose parent is planning to get married to make the decision for the parent and allowing this child to respond to the impending event cannot be emphasized enough. However much a child resents or welcomes his parent's remarriage, he should never be put into the position of assuming responsibility for the decision itself. Marriage is a contract between adults and not between a child and an adult."

A parent can usually determine whether the child and future spouse will relate comfortably by simply observing their interactions and listening carefully to their spontaneous remarks. For example, a child may evidence a sudden interest in a future spouse's hobbies or occupation. "The time spent and experiences shared with the children before marriage will help prepare them for your lifestyle, and give them some notion of what kind of person you are, and what living with you will be like. After remarriage, seek out interesting, enjoyable activities to do as a family," says Dr. Stevanne Auerbach, a parent-child consultant and stepmother.

Parents sometimes maneuver to bring their children and spouses together, but it takes time for the relationship to grow. Stepparents and children who build a relationship naturally and on their own terms can then establish lines of communication, talking through their differences and arriving at some accommodation. It is important for the stepparent and child to have a relationship of their own, independent of the natural parent.



Try to anticipate some of the money problems remarriage can create. Openly discuss your financial situation and concerns before and during remarriage. Honest discussion may reduce friction.

Examining Finances

A major source of friction in a stepfamily is the effect of finances related to the previous marriage. Money is a source of irritation in all families, but in stepfamilies it may be complex. Lillian Messinger, a social worker at the Clarke Institute of Psychiatry in Canada, found in a survey of 70 remarried couples that children and finances topped the list of problems. She discovered that "women feel guilty about the burden their children placed on their new husbands, and men felt reluctant to reveal their true financial assets. For many new couples, money became a sensitive issue that neither partner talked about."

Depending on the amount and regularity of the financial support received from the children's natural parent or the amount of support the former spouse gives to his or her first family, the new family may have to lower its standard of living. Economic pressures may require that both parents work or that they delay or forgo having children. There may be disagreements about whether incoming child-support payments are to be used only for the designated child or for the family as a whole. A wife may resent payments her husband is required to make to his former wife, while he may resent having to support another man's children.

Couples contemplating a new marriage would be wise to take a good, hard look at their financial situation—present and future. A realistic view and honest discussion may reduce future misunderstandings and friction.

The Children



Give children the time they need—to mourn, adjust, accept, and belong.

Coping With Changes

Often great difficulty is experienced by children who have had to cope with either the stress of a divorce or the shock of a parent's death. Becoming part of a new family with a different lifestyle is yet another radical change. It may mean moving to a different house away from old friends and familiar places. The children will now have to share their living space and possessions with a stepparent and maybe with new brothers and sisters. They may lose their positions in the family; from eldest, youngest, or only child, they may become the one in the middle or may have to share a position with another eldest or youngest. Children are bound to have some doubts and anxiety about how these changes will affect their lives and should be encouraged to express them.

Children's reactions to a parent's remarriage may depend in part upon whether they have been separated from a parent by death or divorce and the degree to which they have accepted the separation. Another factor may be the nature of the relationship with the custodial parent in the interval prior to the remarriage—how close parent and children have become and how much dependency has developed between them. Also, the age and emotional maturity of children and the cultural attitudes to which they have been exposed must play some part in how they react to the stepfamily experience.

Children seem to adjust more readily to a parent's remarriage when there is consistency in their relationships with important adults in their lives. That is, children's adjustment may be eased if the remarriage does not threaten their close relationships with the non-custodial parent, grandparents, and other family members. At the same time, they must be helped to understand the changes a remarriage will bring to parental roles—a stepparent now shares in making decisions that affect their lives. Considerable stress can be avoided if parents—custodial, noncustodial, and step—agree to a

consistent set of rules for the children, such as appropriate bedtimes, responsibilities, activities, rewards, and punishments. Thus, "weekend" parents are less apt to overindulge children or compete with custodial parents for children's favors, and children are freed from the confusion and fears involved in manipulating adults.

Time is another essential ingredient in children's adjustment. They need time to mourn their losses and adjust to the changes a remarriage brings to their lives. Stepparents who expect instant love and easy acceptance may be in for disappointment and frustration. Time, patience, understanding, and consistency are the keys to helping children through the adjustment process.



Expect children to have some problems adjusting from a single parent to a stepfamily situation. Understand their problems, but don't try to overcompensate.

Over-attachment to Single Parent

During the interval between the death or divorce and the remarriage, the parent-child relationship may have grown exceptionally close and overdependent. Having been separated from one parent, the child may now feel that the other is being taken away by the stepparent. "My son had to learn that there were others here, and that he had to share me with them," says Lois. "I guess there's a tendency, when there's only one parent, to overcompensate."

The child's possessive feeling for his natural parent may be expressed in jealousy. Although the hostility is initially directed against the "displacer", the child may in fact be even more angry with the "betrayor"—the mother or father who took the new mate. The cause of this behavior is fear—fear that the child will lose to the stepparent his or her special place in the parent's heart. Once the child realizes that this is not so, the insecurity is likely to diminish.

The loss of a parent may constitute a disruption in the process of learning how to love and be loved. A child may feel abandoned by the missing parent and may even feel responsible for the death or divorce. Although a child may desperately want and need love, he or she may adopt a hostile attitude as a defense.



Don't try to replace a lost parent—be an additional parent.

Child Who Has a Dead Parent

Sometimes a child whose parent has died clings to the fantasy that the parent is away on a trip and may return someday. The remarriage is proof that the absent person is really dead. In any case it is not advisable for the stepparent to try to supplant the dead parent. By allowing the relationship to grow gradually, the stepparent can help the child through his or her mourning period. To do otherwise may cause the child to reject the new parent.

There is no need for the child to give up pictures and mementoes. In fact, the child should be encouraged to recall past experiences with the deceased parent, and have any questions answered openly. Complete mourning at his or her own pace allows the child to modify the idealized image of the dead parent to a more realistic one. The goal is to establish a satisfactory relationship with the stepparent without breaking the natural ties with the dead parent. Eventually the child may become very close to the stepparent.

A child initially may be wary of accepting a stepparent, fearing that the stepparent, too, may disappear. The major concern of a 9-year-old whose father had died in a tragic accident was whether Jim, his new stepfather "was going to stay?"



Accept children's loyalty to the absent parent. Children of divorce can have good relationships with both stepparents and natural parents.

Child of Divorce

Remarriage tells the child of divorce that the first marriage is really over, and that the original family can never be reestablished. The child may feel guilty about accepting a new parent, seeing it as a betrayal of his absent parent.

The child's chief concern is likely to center on the changes that may take place in the relationship with the absent parent, especially if there has been a close emotional tie. Initially the child may be hostile toward the stepparent because it seems as if he or she is replacing the absent parent. The experts agree that stepparents should never try to take the place of the natural parent. It is not necessary for the child to reject either the absent parent or the stepparent in order to have a good relationship with one or the other. "They essentially have two sets of parents," says Steve. "You shouldn't try to say, 'these are the authority figures and these are loving figures.' All are authority and all are loving figures. It confuses the kids to separate these roles and messes up the relationship."

The Parents and Some Challenges



Don't expect too much too soon—from yourself or the children. Stepparenting isn't easy.

The Stepparent

Men and women who have not had children may naively believe that parenting comes naturally. Therefore, they may assume that stepparenting "can't be too hard." Those who have children of their own may feel that raising someone else's will be no more difficult. However, it takes even more patience, maturity, and flexibility to be a successful stepparent than a parent. "If you don't have a sense of humor," says Lois, "you can easily fall apart."

It is also important for stepparents to be realistic and not to expect too much too soon. Sometimes this is easier said than done, for assuming a relationship with someone else's children can be very trying. A stepfather "can't march into the new family with the attitude, 'Now I'll take over. I'm the father here!'" says Howard Samuelson, a stepfather and executive director of Remarrieds, Inc. "The newcomer hasn't earned the right to this role." Joyce MacDonald advises stepparents to "go slowly, watch, listen, be available to talk. New parents should realize that they can't make great changes in a short time; it's going to take months. Remember that a child may be just as confused and uneasy as the stepparent."

Stepparents seldom receive the praise and admiration accorded foster parents or those who adopt. Lois, a stepmother of two for 6 years, says, "I don't like being called a stepmother! For instance, when I take the kids for shots or if they get hurt, when I say I'm their adopted mother, I'm treated in a different way, as though I really want them and am trying to help them. But when I say I'm a stepmother, it's like 'she did this to the kid.' I resent this."

Stepparents, like natural parents, commonly feel unappreciated and "used." Because of their role they may find it more difficult than natural parents to ask for appreciation or to express resentment. For example, a stepmother who manages the house, acts as chauffeur, administers first aid, and seldom hears a thank you, may feel more anger than a natural parent and more guilt

about the anger. "None of the work I do gets appreciated," complains Dorothy. "No one says thanks. I cook or clean up; no one says the food tastes good or the house looks nice. That makes me feel like Cinderella and act like the wicked step-mother."

The stepparent may begin to regret marrying a person with children and to yearn for the less complicated single life. "Sometimes I feel that I have all the worries and problems of a parent and none of the joys," laments George, who is married to a divorcee with three teenage sons.

However, the absence of any sign of gratitude does not necessarily indicate a lack of appreciation. All children are sometimes thoughtless and may take their parents for granted. They have subtle ways of expressing loving feelings, for example, by asking for advice or help in completing a project, or emulating the stepparents' manner of dress or speech. Although Joe and his stepson Mike have a good relationship, Joe says, "I'm still surprised to hear the teachers say that Mike is always boasting about me at school."



Help your child and your new spouse understand that your relationships with both are valuable, but different; one cannot replace the other.

The Natural Parent—The Divided Person

Natural parents also are confused about their new roles; they often find themselves caught between loyalties to their children and a desire to please the new mate. The parent who has seen his or her own child's life disrupted by a death or divorce may feel guilty for having put the child through another emotional upheaval by remarrying. For example, a child who is scolded for neglecting his daily chores can easily distort the picture by invoking the steprelationship as the reason for the action, causing the stepparent to question his or her motives and abilities as a parent. The natural parent may then feel guilty, believing all would be peaceful if only the child had not been placed in this situation.

Some children who have had a major share of the natural parent's time and attention tend to become possessive of the parent. They may deliberately engage in behavior that demands the parent's attention. They may become sullen and withdrawn, isolating themselves from the family. They may become disruptive in school or

neglect their studies. Older children may become involved with drugs, engage in other delinquent behavior, or even run away from home. Feeling a need for more time to cultivate the marital relationship, the parent may begin to resent the child. The stepparent may even force the natural parent to choose between him or her and the child, thus threatening both the marriage and the child's sense of security.

On the other hand, the child's unusual behavior may have been precipitated by the parent's preoccupation with the marital relationship. It may be necessary to stress constantly that the husband-wife and parent-child relationships are different, yet both are valuable. A spouse cannot replace the child; nor can a child have a marital relationship with a parent. A child must learn that the stepparent is part of the family and will not be driven away regardless of the tactics used. The stepparent must also realize that the parent is responsible for the child and cannot simply walk away.

The periodical, *Stepparents Forum*, advises, "...time passes, kids grow out of their insecurities, troublesome ex-es marry, move away, or otherwise loosen their hold. Couples grow closer through their crises and stepparents become an accepted part of family history. In stepparenting your greatest ally is time. May you use it well."



Recognize that you may be compared with the absent parent. Be prepared to be tested, manipulated, and challenged in your new role.

Comparisons With the Absent Parent

The stepparent may feel as though he or she is on trial, being constantly compared with the exspouse, or like an "outsider," if the exspouse is still an active part of the family. Stepparents can make it clear to the children that they are different from the natural parents and have different ways of doing things, without giving the impression that they feel they are superior. The stepparent who tries to compete with the absent parent is asking for trouble. Dorothy Lund, in "Stepparent on Trial," advises that stepparents "shouldn't expect to be supermen or women themselves. A stepmother, for example, who strives constantly to have everything right—children must always have balanced meals, clean clothes, an immaculate house—can actually create the very

situation she wishes to avoid. . . . The truth about stepparents is that they are often even more conscientious than natural parents."

Jane's stepchildren had never had to do household chores. When the children protested, "Our mom never made us do that," she explained that "every member of a family should take some responsibility in the home," and began teaching them how to do things. On the other hand, the stepmother can be flexible and accept some of the methods that the children have already learned. When the children protest at having to dry the dishes "because my mom always let them drain in the dish rack," the stepmother could easily adopt this method.

Dorothy Lund tells of Tommy, who brags to his new stepfather about the way his father used to pass a football. Rather than feeling threatened, the stepfather encourages him to talk about his father and feel pride in him.



Don't retreat from a child's challenge. Children need the security of a firm and fair response.

Challenges to Authority

Children will generally test a stepparent and challenge his or her authority "But," says Lois, "I never let the fact that I'm the children's stepmother influence the way I treat them."

In a moment of anger a child may yell, "You're not my real father. You can't tell me what to do!" or "This isn't your house, it's my dad's!" "The first time Gary said that to me," reflects Jim, "I was stunned. His mother backed me up, and it's never happened again."

The child's outburst may be painful to the stepparent, although the child may be merely resentful at having to carry out some chore or may be responding to something totally unrelated to the family. It may help the child and the stepparent to find out what is really causing the anger; but, in any event, the fact that the child has a stepparent is no excuse for him or her to be disobedient.

Dr. Stevanne Auerbach advises, "Try not to be discouraged if you or the children give way to an angry outburst. This happens to everyone at times. The only way to handle such upsets is to acknowledge your feelings and take responsibility for them."

Jim says, "When I punish or scold Gary, I sometimes feel guilty, but I know if I don't do it, it's not going to be better for him in the long run. I don't want to be too hard, but I don't want to be too soft. I want to be fair."

Although children may complain about discipline, they may actually welcome it as a sign that someone cares. A child whose misbehavior goes uncorrected is apt to feel guilty and respond by worse behavior, hoping unconsciously to provoke the discipline he knows he needs. Dr. Duke Fisher, a psychoanalyst, says this reaction is especially true of teenagers. "They want somebody to protect them from their own pretense of omnipotence. They may complain about controls, but in truth they get relief and protection."



Back up your spouse on childrearing issues. Rearing children is tough. Rearing someone else's children is even tougher.

Backup for the Stepparent

Natural parents usually insist that they want their spouses to take an active part in rearing the children, but when the situation actually arises they may find themselves reacting otherwise. "I do get in the way sometimes, when I know I should step back and let him handle the situation," says Mary.

The natural parent may try to "protect" the child from the "outsider," feeling responsible for and defensive about the child's misdeeds. This undermines the stepparent's place in the home. "My wife expects me to correct her child, but when I do, she interposes herself between us. Usually she ends up making the decision, and I back down, and that I don't like," says George, a stepfather. As a result, matters of discipline remain unresolved.

It is essential for the natural parent to support the stepparent in his or her role and to be consistent. Letting the stepparent discipline in one situation and then interfering the next time causes confusion for all concerned and indicates to the children that the parents are divided.

Dorothy remembers that her husband would tell his teenage daughters to help with the household chores, but then he would accuse her, in their presence, of being too hard on them. "They are receiving two signals and don't know which one to believe," she concludes.



Decide, with your mate, what is best for your children and stand by it. It frightens children when they can successfully manipulate adults.

Manipulation

Stepfamilies experience all the problems that occur in the biological family. However, the children may use the steprelationship to gain sympathy and get their own way. Linda had been married to the father of 10-year-old Mark for only 3 weeks when the pool opened. "He told me that his father allowed him to go swimming alone," she says. "I told him I hadn't discussed that with his father yet and would like to check with him first."

"The more agreement on everyday family life you and your mate come to beforehand, the better for you and for the children. If they know that both of you have made the important decisions and will be fair and firm, they will be likely to accept—and eventually respect—even those decisions they may initially complain about," says Dr. Stevanne Auerbach.

In an attempt to win the child's affection, stepparents sometimes tend to give in. "There is an equal danger," says David, "that a stepparent may be easily persuaded by an overly affectionate stepchild." It is important for the stepparent to decide what is best for the child without regard to the effect it will have on the child's opinion of him or her.

A child may attempt to manipulate the parents with whom he or she lives by invoking the absent parent. After spending a week with his real mother, 12-year-old Kurt informed his father and stepmother that he had been allowed to stay up till midnight on school nights. "We told him," says Carol, " 'In this house children your age go to bed at 10.' "

"The problem was," she adds, "that this put us in the 'bad guys' role while his real mother sympathized with him. It would have been much better for all of us if she had cooperated."

Another way the absent parent may interfere is by indulging the children when they are in his or her care. He or she may shower the children with presents or special favors and make every visit seem like a holiday. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles who have acted as surrogate parents, and who fear that they will now lose their former close relationship with the child, may behave similarly. Children, sensing their power, quickly learn to exploit

both sets of parents. When the custodial parents deny a child's request—for example, for a television set of his own—the child may then appeal to the absent parent. The danger is that the custodial parents could get caught up in the competition with the former mate to win the children's favor. To avoid this, the custodial parents should remain firm, while explaining to the children their reasons for their decision.

There will be times when all three parents must decide issues relevant to the child's welfare or share significant occasions in the child's life, such as a school play, scouting or athletic event, religious ceremony, or graduation. Such contacts are inevitable and may create situations of stress which may become even more painful for all if the child has manipulated the two families into competitive camps.



Acknowledge periods of cooperation among stepsiblings. Try to treat stepchildren and your own with equal fairness.

Stepsiblings

When both the husband and wife bring children to the family, the process of becoming a family may sometimes be easier. Both sets of children are both biological children and stepchildren. They can identify with each other because each has been separated from a parent and now has to share the remaining parent. The stepchildren who believe they are being treated unfairly by a stepparent may not feel isolated or abused when they see the stepparent's own children being treated in the same way.

However, this type of family may have to contend with divisive rivalries drawn according to blood lines. Rivalries and cliques are present in most large families, but they may occur in exaggerated form in the stepfamily. Members of each family tend to close ranks and become fiercely protective of one another, regardless of what their relationship has been previously. "Some of the biggest fights that Dorothy and the girls had," recalls Steve, "were ones where she'd get into it with one of them, and the other would come to that one's defense."

One parent may accuse the other of spending too much time playing referee during periods of tension between stepsiblings.

Thankful for a few minutes of peace, they may tend to withhold comment whenever the children seem to be getting along well. They might more wisely refrain from refereeing the squabbles and "referee" the good times instead, by praising and encouraging such signs of cooperation, suggest Ruth Roosevelt and Jeanette Lofas in their book, *Living in Step*.

Questions of allowances, chores, and privileges can create crises. "Once, when I told John he couldn't use the car, he shouted at me, 'you would let me use it if I were your real son,' " recalls Richard. This attitude can be intensified where there are stepsiblings or halfsiblings. Stepparents are sensitive to charges by stepchildren of favoritism toward their own children. When this occurs in the Randall family, says David, "I start by asking both of them what the problem is, and listen to both, and then draw my conclusions. I probably tend to decide against my child to ward off the possibility of her child feeling that I always side with mine."

An older child may feel that he or she has more chores to do, and a younger child that he or she has an earlier bedtime, not because of age, but because he or she is a stepchild. "When I told the girls that they were expected to wash their own clothes," recalls Dorothy, "they wanted to know why Timmie didn't have to do his laundry too. I pointed out to them that, at 7, he wasn't yet tall enough or responsible enough to operate the machine."



Communicate! Don't pretend that everything is fine when it isn't. Acknowledge problems immediately and deal with them openly.

Communicating

Some new couples are so anxious for their marriage to succeed that they avoid expressing or even acknowledging sources of anger or irritation. "Sometimes I feel that if I say what is really on my mind, it could destroy the whole relationship," confides Ray, "and that's a price I don't want to pay." Consequently, conflicts are not discussed or resolved, with the result that the unexpressed hostility becomes stored ammunition ready to explode at any time. The constant pressure for everyone to maintain this artificial harmony creates increasing tension and uneasiness for the entire family. Not only do they avoid complaining about each other, but they also repress criticism of family life in general.

A spouse cannot be expected to respond to a husband's or wife's unexpressed dissatisfaction, wants, or needs. "It seemed as though we did only the things my husband wanted," says Joan. "I felt that I was always giving and never receiving. Then I suddenly realized that he couldn't know what I wanted if I didn't tell him. So I stopped hinting and took the direct approach."

Problems may go unaddressed until the children exhibit a seemingly unrelated difficulty. Ten-year-old Ken became disruptive in school; then he had mysterious pains. The doctor advised a psychologist. "As a result of the counseling, we were able to identify problems in our marriage, and we thought we had a very good marriage!" reports Ken's mother. Another stepparent comments, "I suppose some marriages may be in trouble because of the stepchildren; but I tend to think it's more a basic problem of compatibility between the parents, and the children only reflect the attitudes of the parents."

"If you're going to be a stepfamily," advises Lois, "you have to sit down and talk and really be open. You can't keep your thoughts to yourself. Otherwise, you'll be holding hostilities toward him or his kids."

More Help and Information



Join or form an organization for stepfamilies. Seek counseling before the situation gets out of hand.

Where To Get Help

It can be helpful to discuss what may seem at the time to be insurmountable problems with others who have had first-hand experience in coping with similar problems.

Remarrieds, Incorporated
Box 742,
Santa Ana, CA 92701

This is a voluntary organization designed to help establish a more stable family life in remarriages through programs that are social, educational, and cultural in nature. It provides a forum for the consideration of common problems faced by remarried couples and their children.

The Step Family Foundation
333 West End Avenue
New York, NY 10023

This is a clearinghouse for information and research on the stepfamily and helps to create an awareness of the specific dynamics and problems of steprelationships. This foundation is for those who are involved in steprelationships and want more information.

Just as each person has his own threshold of pain, he also has a level of stress with which he can cope. Whenever a stepparent begins to feel overwhelmed by the frustrations of living in step, it is time to seek outside help. The ideal situation is for all family members to receive counseling, since it can provide neutral ground for discussion of sensitive issues. However, if others are unwilling to accept help, the person feeling the pressure of the situation should proceed on his or her own.

To find the services which best suit your needs, contact one of the following agencies, most of which can be found in your local telephone book:

- Community Mental Health Center
- Mental Health Association of your city or county
- Family Services (or Youth Services) of the Human Resource Department of your city or county
- Women's Commission of your local government

Other counseling services:

- Clerical and pastoral counseling services
- Child guidance centers
- Marriage and family counselors

Services for related problems:

- Drug abuse centers
- Runaway houses
- Planned Parenthood
- Local Hot Line
- Credit counselors

FURTHER READING

Periodicals: Stepparent's Forum

Westmount
P.O. Box 4002
Montreal H3z 2X3, Canada

Designed to offer support and guidance to stepparents in understanding their role and functions.

Books:

The Half Parent: Living With Other People's Children, Brenda Maddox. New York: The New American Library, 1975.

An exploration of the emotional and adjustment problems and rewards of living with other people's children; about the parent by marriage.

Remarriage, Carmel Berman Reingold. New York: Harper & Row, 1976.

The first book to be published entirely on the subject of remarriage. Discusses such problems as the ex-spouse, stepchildren, in-laws, money, and making friends again.

Living in Step, Ruth Roosevelt and Jeanette Lofas. New York: Stein and Day, 1976.

Deals with the realities of remarriage and the complex family ties no one is experienced to handle.

Stepchild in the Family, Anne W. Simon. New York: Pocketbooks, 1965.

A thoughtful examination of the effects of remarriage on children.

Stepparenting: Implications for Research and Practice, Renato Espinoza and Yvonne Newman. NIMH. In press.

Reviews empirical literature in the area of stepparenting and discusses special problems of stepfamilies. Makes recommendations for future research and provides helpful suggestions for stepparents and helping professions.

Your Child? I Thought It Was My Child, Owen and Nancy Spann. Pasadena, Calif.: Ward Ritchie Press, 1977.

Offers many ideas, based on the authors' personal experiences, for coping with the problems of stepchildren, stepparents, and stepgrandparents.

The Successful Stepparent, Helen Thomson. New York: Harper & Row, 1966.

Provides concrete advice on all sorts of situations that arise in everyday living, including the first meeting of the child with the stepparent, the first adjustments after remarriage, and the many problems that are bound to crop up through the years.

The Second Time Around: Remarriage in America, Leslie Aldrich Westoff. New York: Viking, 1977.

Personal experiences, statistics, conclusions, and advice for the four out of five divorced people who remarry.

Articles:

From Stepparent to Real Parent, Stevanne Auerbach, *Parents Magazine*, June 1976.

Stepparent on Trial, Dorothy Lund, *Parents Magazine*, January 1975.

Remarriage Between Divorced People with Children from Previous Marriages: A Proposal for Preparation for Remarriage, Lillian Messinger. *Journal of Marriage & Family Counseling*, Vol. 2(2): 193-200, April 1976.

FILM:

Step-parenting: New Families, Old Ties. Polymorph
Films, Boston, Mass. 1977.

*Explores the realities of becoming an instant family
through scenes of stepfamily life and interviews with
parents and professionals.*